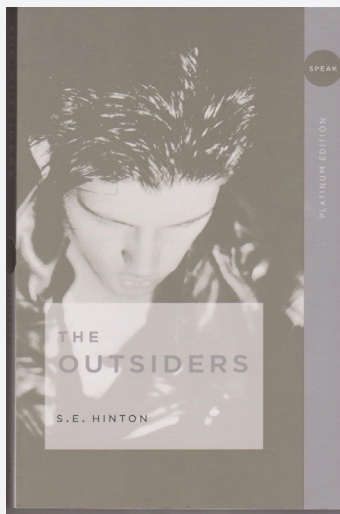


First Opinion: S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*: First Look

Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. 1967. New York: Speak, Penguin Group, 2012.

Jennifer S. Dail



Published in 1967, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* has emerged as a classic in the young adult (YA) canon and has often been considered the book that established YA literature as a subset with its own standards. Basing the novel on events at her own Oklahoma high school and focusing on gang rivalry between the lower class greasers and upper class Socs, Hinton felt prompted to fill a void by writing a book that realistically portrayed the lives of adolescents—a key feature in young adult literature (*Something About the Author* 68).

As a high school student in the 1980's none of our honors English teachers told us that there were novels written specifically for readers of our age. *The Outsiders* was the only YA novel I was required to read for school. I found the book faster paced and more engaging than the stuffer canonical works we read, and that made it enjoyable. I could grasp and discuss the themes without laboring over the writing style.

Consequently, I now require my pre-service English teachers to read it, and they respond favorably as well. The novel offers a short, quick read with relatable characters who desire something more than the social trappings of high school gangs (or cliques, by contemporary terms)—all common elements for a highly accessible YA novel. As Peck asserts, not only is *The*

Within my discussion all further references for *Something about the Author* will be SATA; all listings for *Children's Literature Review* will be labeled CLR 3; listings for *Contemporary Literary Criticism* will be CLC.

Outsiders "credited with changing the way Y.A. fiction is written, [it] changed the way teenagers read as well, empowering a generation to demand stories that reflected their realities."

In early commentary about *The Outsiders*, Hinton noted, "Teen-agers should not be written down to" (CLR 3,69). She continued on to say, "Teen-agers know a lot today. Not just things out of a textbook, but about living. . . Writers needn't be afraid that they will shock their teen-age audience. But give them something to hang onto. Show that some people don't sell out, and that everyone can't be bought. Do it realistically. Earn respect by giving it" (CLR 3,70). Only seventeen when she wrote the novel, Hinton represented her own target audience and knew of their struggles and desires.

Although the book reflects realities that connected with adolescence in 1967 and still do today, many reviewers faulted the plot amidst their praise for its fast-paced writing. While the book brought popularity with adolescent readers, it received both praise and criticism for its writing and storyline. Notably, the criticism came from adult readers—not the intended young adult audience. In 1967 Thomas Fleming wrote, "Hinton's fire-engine pace does not give the reader much time to manufacture doubts" about the believability of the storyline, implying cracks in the narrative that readers pass so quickly there is not time to fully notice them (CLR 3,70). Meanwhile, in 1974 John Rowe Townsend noted, "True feeling is hopelessly entangled with false, bad-film sentimentality, and the plot is creakingly unbelievable". While maintaining criticism of *The Outsiders* by calling the first-person narrative overly didactic, in 1970 A. Chambers declares the novel's belonging in secondary schools: "The story has humour, passion, tenderness, intelligence, action a-plenty and, best of all, compassion. It is worth a place in any secondary school or public library" (CLR 3,71).

Early reviews of *The Outsiders* carry criticism of the characters towards a comparison of Ponyboy and Salinger's Holden Caulfield; both characters have a romantic yearning for something better beyond what the adult world seems to offer (CLC 30, 204). Reviewer William Jay Jacobs notes, "But as much as the sensitive, thoughtful Ponyboy resembles Holden, his milieu is irrevocably different. All around him are hostility and fear, along with distrust for the 'system'" (CLC 30,204). Therein lies the thematic appeal to adolescents. What young reader doesn't long for something better? What young reader doesn't distrust some aspect of the "system" at some point in time? Adolescence often centers on identity development and finding a place in the world—frightening endeavor because of the constant uncertainty. Finally, Jacobs continues, noting, "Admittedly, this is not on all counts a remarkable book. The dialogue sometimes rings false, and the message may be a shade too profound to be mouthed by teen-aged 'hoods.' Still there is little of the pretentiousness here, the whining tone, that characterizes the first statements of youthful authors" (CLC 30, 204). This very lack of pretentiousness invites contemporary adolescents to enjoy *The Outsiders* forty-seven years after its publication.

Works Cited

- Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. 1967. New York: Speak, 2006.
- Peck, Dale. "'The Outsiders': 40 Years Later." *New York Times*, 23 September 2007.
- "S(usen) E(loise) Hinton (1950)." *Something about the Author*. Ed. Alan Hedblad. Vol. 115. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. 67-76.
- "S(usen) E(loise) Hinton." *Children's Literature Review* 3 (1978): 69-73.
- "S. E. Hinton." *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 30 (1984): 203-206.

About the Author

Jennifer S. Dail is an associate professor of English education at Kennesaw State University. She enjoys working with teachers and students in an effort to connect her scholarly work and teaching to current classroom practices. Her recent publications are in the area of young adult literature and focus on engaging students with texts and teachers' uses in classroom instruction. Her current research focuses on using digital mediums to promote reflectivity in pre-service teachers and on teachers' professional development.